



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

William Law, for one, connects this mystic conception of Christ with the teaching of Paul. In his *Spirit of Prayer* he writes:

It is the language of Scripture that Christ in us is our hope of glory, that Christ formed in us—living, growing, and raising his own Life and Spirit in us—is our only Salvation.

Contrasting this with the conventional idea he continues:

For this holy Jesus that is to be formed in thee, that is to be the Savior and new Life of thy soul, that is to raise thee out of the darkness of death into the light of Life, and give thee power to become a son of God, is already within thee, living, stirring, calling, knocking at the door of thy heart.

Doubtless there is a temptation, against which we should be on guard, to press the implications of this Christ mystery of Paul too far; yet we cannot blind ourselves to its limitless suggestiveness.

The mysticism of Paul differs from that of Jesus. It is less calm and clear and steady. It is less closely associated with nature. It is more speculative and vehement. But it shares the same spirit and principles. It is kindled at the same altar. In fact, it is so closely attached to Christ that it unites him, as a revealing personality, with the Father and Spirit as source and object of mystic knowledge and faith, and thus guides and influences the entire development of Christian mysticism.

## THE SONG OF SONGS—A SECULAR POEM

JOSEPH D. IBBOTSON, JR.

Instructor in Hebrew in Hamilton College, Clinton, N.Y.

The fascination of Canticles for students of Hebrew literature is evidenced by the large library of expository works that has grown up around it, and the scores of interpretations that have been put forward in the effort to explain it. These many interpretations fall into two classes, allegorical and literal. The former are now given up by Protestant scholars, and need detain us but a moment. The allegorical treatment of the Song began among the Jews as early as the first century of the Christian era. They believed that it set forth the love of Jehovah for Israel, and ultimately

that the whole history of the chosen people could be discovered in its pages. I have tried to picture to myself the man who first devised this reading of the Song of Songs. He must have been something of a recluse, narrowly ecclesiastical in his mental habits, unused to secular ways of thinking, convinced that the Jews are God's favorites, habituated to the thought of God as Israel's wedded Lord and Lover, familiar with the subterfuge of allegorical interpretation, hopeless of accounting for the supposed Solomonic authorship of the book in any other way, and quite destitute of a sense

of humor. So fantastic an exegesis could have been taken over from the Jews by Christians only in an age when religion found expression through unreal and fantastic metaphors. It persisted through so many centuries because some kind of religious significance had to be given the book, and because there have always been enough people who can say after Tertullian, "Credo quia impossibile est." But it is astounding that many generations of Christian people have allegorized certain parts of the book without a shudder; for instance, that they have thought of Jesus as praising his church under the figure of a woman and saying to her: "The turnings of thy thighs are like jewels, the work of a cunning craftsman; thy navel is like a round goblet, wherein no mingled wine is wanting; thy belly is like a heap of wheat, set about with lilies; thy two breasts are like two fawns that are twins of a doe."

Within the last century or so it has been fashionable to regard the Song of Songs as a little drama that sets forth a love-affair of that much-experienced man, King Solomon. The hypothetical drama consists in the main of speeches that pass between the king and a beautiful young woman, a country maiden from the northern village of Shunem, who has been brought to the harem in Jerusalem. She responds to Solomon's flatteries and endearments by no word of denial, but emulates him in the extravagance of her speech. From time to time a Chorus of "daughters of Jerusalem"—harem ladies, it is supposed—interrupts with further praise of Solomon, or praise of the country girl, which may be construed as ironical.

It is assumed by some of the interpreters that the heroine loves a peasant, who is indeed unnamed and absent; that all her replies to Solomon are really meant for the invisible peasant. While she is at the court, she pines for her shepherd lover, recounts to the unsympathetic, jealous ladies of the harem her nightly dreams about him, indulges in reminiscences of her happy intercourse with him in the past, and holds imaginary conversations with him, heedless of the sneers of the "daughters of Jerusalem." The last scene, in which the Shulamite maiden appears, happy with her lover in her old home, points the convenient and desired moral of the tale: faithful love is a lightning-flame, indestructible and unquenchable; it resists the allurements of the royal court, and finds its happiness in a vine-embowered cottage.

There are insurmountable difficulties in the way of this explanation of the Song of Songs. No Semitic drama is known to have existed. From Palestine to Babylonia the Semites had no theater, no stage. The Song cannot be a primitive folk-play, for it is utterly unlike all known dramas of that kind; "closet-drama" is out of the question. The book contains no divisions into scenes, no stage-directions, no list of persons, and no indication of the speakers. Regarded as a drama, it is without action, without beginning, and without an end. The talk gives us no certain information about the *dramatis personae*, their relations with one another, or the issue of their talk. The book contains some 400 short lines, and can be read through slowly in Hebrew in half an hour, and yet it must be divided

into a large number of very short scenes. Grant a Hebrew stage, could the spectators have understood what was proceeding on the stage? The frequent changes of scene are, from our point of view, quite unnecessary, except that the "play" is meaningless unless so divided; but did the Hebrew stage supply the machinery by which such rapid changes could alone have been rendered intelligible?

The pretty story of faithful love which the dramatic interpreters of Canticles have imagined is itself quite impossible. It mixes with ancient customs of the East the most modern notions about the relations of the sexes. How strange a harem is this of Solomon's! The ladies of the harem, who, by the way, are anomalously called "daughters of Jerusalem," go in and out at will. The heroine, while an inmate of the harem, runs about the city streets, chats with her lover through the window, even kisses him in the king's presence; unless all these incidents are to be explained as dreams.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, half of the "action" passes in dreamland.

It is no more reasonable to moralize the Song of Songs by making a play of it than by treating it as an allegory. Not this way lies the justification of its place in the Canon.

The most obvious interpretation remains. Canticles is a collection of Hebrew love-songs. Herder and Goethe, in the eighteenth century, were so bold as to advance this view, and they have been followed by many scholars since.

<sup>1</sup> Of course a Hebrew girl of the third century before Christ, or earlier, would not even have dreamt of such things!

<sup>2</sup> Judg. 14:11-17.

<sup>3</sup> Isa. 61:10. Talmud, *Sotera*, c. 9; Baba, *Gemara Gittim*, cl; *Pirke*, c. 16.

"Wer der Dichter will verstehen, muss in Dichters Lande gehen."

To understand Canticles we must go to the East, where, in isolated communities, the customs of the people have remained stationary, with their civilization, for thirty centuries. There one may still hear the peasants singing by the fireside and at the taverns such songs as we find in Canticles, just as they used to do 2,000 years ago. Rabbi Aqqiba, in the second century, complained that the young men sang songs from Canticles at their merrymakings and over their wine. But without reason did he reproach them, for they were only doing what their fathers had done before anyone suspected that those songs were sacred. The lines quoted above for the sake of Dr. Gill's exegesis are a part of the description of a bride's beauty. There are three other similar songs in Canticles. The people of Palestine still have a technical name for a poem of that kind, so popular is it. They call it a *wasf*. Such poems, and others that resemble parts of Canticles, are still sung at rural weddings, and for weddings they were first composed.

Among the ancient Hebrews the celebration of a wedding was elaborate and prolonged. The distinctive wedding customs were very ancient, and from the earliest times the celebration properly lasted a week.<sup>2</sup>

Bridegroom and bride were king and queen,<sup>3</sup> crowned on their wedding-day. During the week they were not supposed to work, and were served by their sub-

jects.<sup>1</sup> The young king was, of course, the pattern of kingly wisdom and grace, a very Solomon; the queen, the fairest among women. Among the Jews of the dispersion the practice was kept up: traces of it survive in many parts of the world.<sup>2</sup> To illustrate the realism of the custom comes this story of King Agrippa. Meeting a bridal procession one day in a narrow street, he turned aside to let it pass. His attendants remonstrating, he replied, "This bride is a queen only for this occasion; but I enjoy the honors of a king every day."<sup>3</sup>

The "friends of the bridegroom" set up a royal palanquin in the fields outside the city for the use of the king and queen. Of whatever rough material it was made, it was richly adorned, and in the eyes of the wedding party its splendor was princely. From this throne the royal pair ruled their subjects.<sup>4</sup> The costume of the bride was elaborate, strung over with coins, ribbons, and jewels. The eastern bride still wears about her person as much of her portion as she can. "Adorned as a bride for her husband" became proverbial for elaborate beauty. When a girl was born, the parents planted an acacia tree. From its branches they made a chariot or chair for her use on her wedding day.<sup>5</sup>

Certain martial features of the celebration seem to have been a survival from a more primitive age, when the bride was taken by force. The king had his military guard, armed as if against surprise of enemies.<sup>6</sup> They

accompanied him in procession at midnight when he went to take his bride.<sup>7</sup> They greeted him on the morning after the marriage as a conqueror returning from a successful military campaign.<sup>8</sup> The bride, too, showed her prowess by dancing the war-dance of her clan when she was taken by the bridegroom's men.<sup>9</sup>

The wedding was celebrated with songs, dances, games, jests, and riddles.<sup>10</sup> Some of the songs must have been of a conventional pattern, especially those that were connected with the ancient institutions of the festival—the carrying-off of the bride, the sword dance, the royal bodyguard, the palanquin, the description of king and queen in their royal array. The wedding guests doubtless bore a large part in the singing, but in Jerusalem, and perhaps in other cities, there were gilds of professional wedding-singers, corresponding to the better-known gilds of professional mourners.<sup>11</sup> In accordance with Hebrew idiom, the singing gilds of the capital might have been called "daughters of Jerusalem." They must have owned a collection of songs appropriate for weddings. Such a collection, indeed, still exists. It has found its way into the Old Testament, where it is known as the Song of Songs.

If we take our place among the wedding guests at a typical Hebrew wedding, see what we can of the festival, and listen to a few of the songs, we shall the better realize the uses for which Canticles was first intended.

It is springtime, the most delightful

<sup>1</sup> *Pirke*, c. 16.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., in Germany, Poland.

<sup>3</sup> *Semahoth*, c. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Wetzstein, "Syrische Dreschtafel," *Ztschr. f. Ethnologie*, 1873.

<sup>5</sup> Talmud.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Macc. 9:37-47.

<sup>8</sup> Wetzstein, *loc. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Judg., chap. 14; Wetzstein.

<sup>7</sup> Matt., chap. 25.

<sup>9</sup> Wetzstein, *loc. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> *Semahoth*, 126.

season of the year. All the preparations for the wedding have been made. The bride's girl-friends have decked her in her finery—her coins, spangles, and jewels—and her elaborate toilet is finished. At midnight a cry is heard, "The bridegroom is coming! Go out to meet him!" In jubilant procession he is marching with his friends, who are armed and carry torches. Arrived at the home of the bride, they greet her as she ventures out of doors:

Who like the rosy dawn appears,  
Fair as the moon, bright as the sun,  
In glittering array, like bannered hosts?

Hesitating, as though to explain her situation, the bride sings:

I was just going down to the garden of nuts,  
To see the green plants in the valley,  
To see if the grape-vines were budding,  
If the pomegranate yet were in bloom:—  
Lo! ere I knew how it happened  
I was set in the car of my clan!

She makes as if to escape and they call out:

Return, return, oh Shulamite!  
Return, we would behold thee,  
Behold thee in the sword dance.

She hesitates, deprecates:

Nay! behold the Shulamite  
Dancing the sword dance of her clan?

But she complies; and while she dances, brandishing a naked sword, the guests accompany her with their song in praise of her beauty.<sup>1</sup>

Now the procession moves slowly to the house of the bridegroom's father,<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Remember how she is arrayed.

<sup>2</sup> Macc. 9:37-47. "The marriage of Samson is the only instance in the Old Testament in which the bride remains in her father's house."—Moore, *Judges*, p. 340.

<sup>3</sup> Cant. 1:2-4. The text corrected by comparison with ancient versions. See Kittel's *Bibl. Hebr.*

<sup>4</sup> Cant. 3:6-11.

the virgins, crowded around the bride, dragging her forward; good form requires that the bride hold back, showing due maidenly reserve. The banquet follows, with music and dancing by the singers. The company join in the songs, and no doubt indulge in jests at the expense of the young couple. This is their last opportunity for practical jokes in that quarter; before the merrymaking is over the mother of the bridegroom crowns the king and queen. Finally, the bride gives the signal for the ending of the feast. Her husband is so fine a fellow that she is sure all the girls were in love with him; but she is the lucky one, and it is her privilege to sing:

O that now he would kiss me!—  
Caresses are better than wine.  
Fragrant the smell of your perfumes,—  
Perfume outpoured is your name:  
The maidens all were in love with you!  
Take me along! Let us run!  
Take me, my king, to your chamber!  
There find we our pleasure now!  
Caresses are better than wine.—  
No wonder they loved you!<sup>3</sup>

At sunrise of the second day of the "king's week" the friends of the bridegroom, a noisy crowd, armed with swords, are carrying the palanquin down to the threshing-floor, which is at this season of the year a green meadow fragrant with wild flowers. As they go, they sing the martial song of the palanquin:<sup>4</sup>

What is this that comes up through the country in clouds of smoke!

Fragrant with myrrh and frankincense,  
and spices brought from far!  
Lo! the royal palanquin!  
Sixty mighty men surround it,  
Chosen, valiant Israelites,  
Swordsmen all, expert in war;  
Each one ready, sword on thigh,  
For the night-surprise of foes.

A palanquin the king hath made,  
Of cedar from Mount Lebanon;  
Its pillars silver, floor of gold,  
Adorned, inwrought with ebony;  
Its purple seat a gift of love  
From the Daughters of Jerusalem.

At the threshing-floor they set up a throne, and raise above it a white awning, “the curtains of Solomon.”<sup>1</sup> When all is ready, the company of women is seen approaching:

O daughters of Zion, come forth, with greetings for Solomon, king:  
Behold him, crowned with the crown which his mother set on his brow,  
Crowned as she crowned him king on his happy wedding day!

Songs, dances, games, and riddles follow through the day, and well into the night. Among the most popular of the songs are those that describe the beauty of the bride and bridegroom in a series of metaphors from nature, like the accompaniment of the sword dance. To our ears, they are the most monotonous of all. Far more attractive are the love-songs, fragrant with the odors of vineyards and orchards, and the songs reminiscent of the courtship, or anticipatory of the pleasures of married life. Here is one of the songs of reminiscence: the bride is supposed to be singing; it is early morning in springtime:

Hark! my lover! yonder he cometh,  
Bounding down the mountain-side,  
Down the hill-side, eagerly.  
Like the swift gazelle, my lover,  
Like the mountain hart for lightness!

By the wall he standeth,  
At the gate he lingereth,  
Looketh in at window,  
Glanceth through the lattice.  
Hark! he speaketh, calleth:

“Rise, my love, my fair one,  
Come away with me, dear!  
Now the rains are over,  
Past and gone is winter,  
Blossoms in the meadows,  
Songs of birds, invite thee—  
Song of doves, enticing.  
Now the figs are ripening,  
Vineyards are in blossom,  
Fragrant are the gardens.

“Rise, my love, my fair one,  
Come away with me, dear!  
Oh my dove, shy hiding  
In thy rocky covert,  
Let me see thy face, now,  
Let me hear thee singing,  
For thy voice is music,  
And thy face is beauty.”<sup>3</sup>

Here is a bit of song that seems to be the accompaniment for a romping game:

Let us catch the foxes,  
Little thieving foxes,  
Spoilers of our vineyards—  
For now our vineyards blossom.<sup>4</sup>

If the “daughters of Jerusalem” are the singers of the gild, the meaning of the following refrain, which has always perplexed commentators, becomes sufficiently clear:

I adjure you, oh ye daughters of Jerusalem,

<sup>1</sup> Cant. 1:5.

<sup>2</sup> Cant. 3:11.

<sup>3</sup> Cant. 2:8-14.

<sup>4</sup> Cant. 2:15.

By the hinds and by the wild roes of  
the wilderness,  
That ye arouse not love,  
Nor awake desire,  
Till its time be come.<sup>1</sup>

Like the first day are all that follow through the week. Quickly it passes. The peasant king and queen step down from their throne as man and wife, to take up the long, monotonous drudgery of their work-a-day station. Their spring festival is ended. Their last song is at once the most serious and the finest in the collection. It is the song of the wife, who will be such a wife as is described in the last chapter of Proverbs, and desires all her husband's love and labor sealed to a deathless love:

Set me, as a seal on thy heart,  
As a seal on thine arm:  
For love is strong as death,  
Passion, as Sheol dark:  
A lightning-flash its fire,  
A very flame of God.  
Many waters cannot quench love,  
Nor can floods of ocean drown it.

Who should bring his substance,  
Love to buy—his purchase  
Would be utter scorn.<sup>2</sup>

It would be interesting to know how Canticles found its way into the Canon. Of course we have no information on that point, and can but bring together such indirect evidence as is available, and draw our inferences.

It is attributed to Solomon. "The choicest of all Songs, by Solomon"—so runs the title. But the title was affixed by someone who was ignorant of the origin and real character of the book.

It contains Persian and possibly Greek words, and cannot have been written before the fourth century at the earliest. Four times in the body of the poetry is Solomon mentioned, and in at least three of these instances the reference is to the wedding-king. That is not surprising, for even at the present time the wedding-king in Palestine is sometimes nicknamed after a famous monarch. When we recall the eagerness of the Jews in welcoming any book that seemed to come to them from the men of their heroic age, their diligence in attributing Psalms to David on the slightest internal suggestion, their practice of writing books in the name of Solomon, Enoch, Moses, and other ancients, we can understand that a scribe of the first century, finding in the old manuscript of Canticles these references to Solomon, would write above the text the title it now bears.

Nor is the admission of Canticles to the Canon very puzzling when we remember the character and methods of the scribes, as they are illustrated, for example, in the Talmud; their conviction that every book that they could credit to the fathers was religiously significant; their reverence for tradition; and their utter incapacity in historical criticism. They may well have recognized that the songs were of a familiar type, and have supposed that Solomon wrote these by inspiration after the familiar model, for religious uses, or even that the secular songs were the imitations.

The Song of Songs did not make its way into the Old Testament without

<sup>1</sup> Cant. 2:7; 3:5, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Cant. 8:6, 7.

a struggle. It is often assumed that the Canon of the Hebrew Scriptures was fixed long before the Christian era. This assumption is, however, contrary to the fact. The limits of the Canon were not fixed until the Jewish Council of Jamnia, about the year 90 of our era, undertook to settle current disputes about a number of the minor books; and we know that for half a century longer there were leading rabbis who protested against the inclusion of Esther and the Song of Songs. In the Talmud we read of Rabbi Samuel, who doubted the canonicity of Esther, and of eighty-five others, among whom were thirty "prophets," who denied that Purim was a divinely instituted festival.<sup>1</sup> The opposition to Canticles seems to have been no less vigorous. Prominent Palestinian teachers of the first century rejected it, or questioned its value. How warm the dispute had been appears from the intemperate language of Rabbi Aqqiba. Some of the rabbis having quoted these earlier scholars, he burst out: "No true Israelite ever questioned the inspiration of Canticles! All the days of the world are not to be compared to the day in which Canticles was given to Israel; for while all Scriptures (*Kethubim*) are holy, Canticles is the holy of holies."<sup>2</sup>

The writers of the New Testament seem to have agreed with those Jews of the first century who doubted the sacredness of Esther and Canticles. They never quote from them directly or indirectly; they never show the faintest influence of their thought or phraseology. The argument from silence is unusually strong in the case of Canticles, for in all the metaphorical references to the New Testament to Christ as the Bridegroom there is no trace of the influence of the language of the Song of Songs.

Although the little book that has been engaging our attention is destitute of religious value, its inclusion in the Old Testament may be accounted fortunate, for it illustrates for us certain aspects of Jewish life and custom of which we would otherwise have remained in ignorance, and its literary merit is, of course, unquestioned. So little of the secular literature of the Hebrews has come down to us, that our picture of their social and domestic life is incomplete. Canticles helps us to realize the people at play, to see them in their human relations. It illustrates more than one episode in the life of Jesus, and gives us a fresh commentary on the parable of the Foolish Virgins.

<sup>1</sup> *Megilla*, 7a; Wildeboer, *Canon*, pp. 66 f.

<sup>2</sup> *Yadaim*, 3, 5 (Mishna).